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STATINTL

The Downed Plane

An Interview With Bobby R. Inman

What Probably Happened

Q: *What's your theory of the case?*

A: In looking at the pieces of information that have filtered down through the news coverage—that's the only access I've had—I pieced it together this way:

My guess is that, at the time the Korean airliner leaves Anchorage, the program put into the computer for driving the navigation system is in substantial error. The aircraft takes off, proceeds along the route, begins to go off its normal course, cuts into and actually crosses into Soviet airspace and perhaps beyond that, over land space.

Q: *How did that original computer error get made and not perceived?*

A: Totally by the Koreans. But the data being relayed back show that, because of the program error, the plane's on its normal track. And to the pilot, it appears that he is on his normal track. But in reality he's very substantially off course. That will take some explaining by somebody else who knows those systems better. But I don't know any other way this series of events could have occurred unless that happened.

The aircraft actually would be normally tracked by the Soviets, as everything that flies on the periphery is 24 hours a day. The fact that it moved toward the coast would be detected rapidly. The Soviet air defense system goes into alert as they see the prospective and then real penetration of airspace. We are told that eight aircraft reacted, which says to me four missions of two aircraft each spread out over a substantial period of time.

Identification passes have to have identified it as a 747: it's too distinctive an airplane to be misidentified. In the nighttime there may have been some difficulty in identifying it as Korean. The Soviets at that point had to be discussing how to get it to land. What we don't know, of

course, is what kind of signals they tried to use back and forth. In the daytime, clearly, it's much easier with the rocking of wings and the other things that the pilot can clearly see. At night that becomes a little more complex.

But if I'm right in my guess about the bad computer program, the Korean pilot and crew, believing they're over international waters, aren't about to follow a signal from Soviet aircraft to divert and land. And so they proceed.

The Soviets are determined not to let an intruder actually come into their territory and escape, with memories of '78 [when another Korean

airliner penetrated northern Russia] and the criticisms of the poor performance of their air defense system fresh in their minds. They make the decision, since the Koreans are not responding, to shoot it down. Instead of using cannons as in '78, they use heat-seeking missiles.

Q: *You are saying that the Korean pilot could very well have figured that he was over proper waters, in international airspace, and so he never knew what hit him?*

A: Exactly. He saw the action, he saw aircraft. He maybe even understood signals. But having the Soviets go out to fly around commercial airlines is not a unique event. They're targets of opportunity, to look at, reconnaissance, to practice anything. So it may well be that the Koreans had previously had aircraft come up, look at them, pace and proceed back, when they're proceeding in international airspace. The presence itself of the fighters therefore would not be an instant cause for great alarm. But obviously any signals, any kind of rocking or lights being flashed, does become cause. Then the pilot faces the question, why are they trying to divert me? If he believes he's in international airspace, then he continues to fly, never responding.

Q: *We read in the papers that the Japanese military picked up that the plane was off course. We know that the Korean airline itself was aware the plane was late. Why wasn't two and two put together?*

A: There's a time factor here. Very likely, first, the Korean people didn't know it was late until it didn't arrive.

Q: *Don't they pick it up some hundreds of miles out?*

A: Not a long way. They don't think to track commercial flights just for tracking. But it would have been picked up at a distance—let's give it 100 to 150 miles out across the Sea of Japan. That's still well short of where it ran into its problems.

As for the Japanese radar, the question is what's the time factor involved there. They have no way in all probab-

ity of knowing the identity of the aircraft that they track. They know it's not theirs. But they don't know whose it is.

Q: *So it would be very difficult for it to occur to them to pick up a phone.*

A: That's right. And even if they were to pick up a phone, how? to whom? This does perhaps pose a need to rework the procedures for international air traffic. The Soviets are not part of the normal process in handling international aircraft. And there's a long gap in there between Anchorage and where the Japanese would pick up.

Q: *Cut a little deeper into the Soviet reaction. Why would there not have occurred to them the 100 reasons for not shooting that would occur to us?*

A: Because you're thinking as an American, and not as a Soviet. To an American, in this country, human life is the No. 1 priority. And property and territorial matters come a very distant second. It is inconceivable to me that the United States would ever delegate authority to engage a civilian airliner in peacetime.

With the Soviets the priority is exactly the other way around. The first priority is that they will not tolerate any intrusion into their airspace. And if it occurs, they will force the aircraft down. And if the aircraft tries to escape, they'll destroy it.

Q: *You are suggesting, or you are stating as a fact, that the shoot-down decision was made by the local people way out in Siberia, even though this event was going on at the dinner hour in Moscow?*

A: I believe there is a strong likelihood, following the '78 incident, that they reviewed their procedures. It's the normal Soviet reaction when they're poked fun at, when they're criticized by the West for poor performance.

They have a long aversion to any aircraft that comes in whether it's a small aircraft wandering over from Turkey or a military aircraft doing peripheral reconnaissance or a commercial airliner. In the '78 incident, an enemy aircraft got too far in. They were sluggish in detecting it, they were very slow in reacting. When they went up to try in fact to fire at it, the guy dove and found ice on a lake on which he landed. He didn't know where he was. If he had known where he was he'd have gone to Finland instead.

Subsequent to that, I believe, the odds are very high that the Soviets established an autonomous air defense system. They delegated authority to intercept and force to land and, if that did not work, to destroy.

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Now, given the way information flows centrally in the Soviet Union on everything, information clearly must have been flowing to Moscow as the events were occurring. So at least someone in Moscow at an air defense headquarters knew they were tracking an aircraft, knew that the aircraft was over land or at least was penetrating Soviet airspace, knew that they had reacted to this and that ultimately they intended to destroy it.

So the prospect is clearly there for someone in Moscow to override that decision, but I believe it is already established with civilian Politburo approval that there will be no penetration of Soviet airspace, and if an aircraft does, just shoot it down if it won't land. It doesn't matter whether it's civilian or military.

Q: So we are dealing with a very grim reminder of how that system works but not necessarily with a new political fact that has to enter into our calculations on other dealings with the Soviet Union?

A: Exactly right. It is a grim reminder of their value system, of their general attitude about anything that penetrates Soviet territory. And the ruthlessness with which they will deal with that without any second thoughts.

Now, I'm sure at this point in time there are a great many people in Moscow who would like to reverse this event. Not because an airplane was shot down with a loss of lives but because of the stark reminder it has for the rest of the world; it does an awful lot to clear the air after this very sophisticated campaign we've watched over the last two years of their trying to portray themselves as the peacemakers and the United States as the great threat to world peace.

Q: If that is their presumed purpose, then why are they fudging and lying about it?

A: Well, there's no easy answer for them. I cringed, as I always do, when we began providing details of events that we've collected from sensitive intelligence sources and methods, because of the likelihood that the Soviets will track back through that process and determine not only how much we knew but maybe even how we knew it and will take steps to cut us off. But with our decision to declassify and to make a direct statement and not let leaks occur and do perhaps even more damage, the Soviets were put at an immediate disadvantage. So much detail is provided that they are not left with the easy option to mislead.

Let's face it, we have been in the climate in this country and in much of the West for the last decade, where what the U.S. government says is almost immediately questioned—are they telling the truth? What the Soviets, the Nicaraguans, the Cubans say is almost immediately accepted as the truth and then later challenged. In this case the depth of detail is such that the Soviets are at a very substantial disadvantage.

Q: Why don't they just say, we're sorry but we do not allow our territory to be penetrated?

A: That would be a much smarter response.

Q: The truth is not in them?

A: Well, the truth in this case is not a likely response. But they may come to that. And it would be a much smarter way to deal with it. Trying to portray this as a Korean plane doing a spying mission is just pure nonsense. We certainly wouldn't have wanted it. We have much better ways of getting the information. If the Koreans had had anything they had wanted to know, they would have come to ask us for it—not fly a 747 loaded with passengers when they're trying to build a commercial airline business. It's such a shallow lie that it makes the Soviet case even worse.

WASHINGTON POST
2 September 1983

U.S. Says Soviets Shot Down Airliner

By A. D. Horne

Washington Post Foreign Service

A missile fired by a Soviet jet fighter downed a Korean Air Lines jet with 269 persons aboard near the Soviet island of Sakhalin Wednesday, American officials charged yesterday, calling on Moscow to explain "this appalling act."

The Boeing 747, whose passengers included Rep. Larry McDonald (D-Ga.) among an estimated 30 or more Americans, apparently plunged into the Sea of Japan, with no sign of any survivors. The plane went down early Thursday morning, Tokyo time, which was Wednesday afternoon here.

Soviet officials, facing mounting international outrage, did not acknowledge downing the plane. A brief statement issued in Moscow by the official Tass news agency said only that Soviet fighter planes had tried to guide "an unidentified plane" that twice "violated the air space of the U.S.S.R.," but that "the intruder plane did not react to the signals and warnings from the Soviet fighters and continued its flight in the direction of the Sea of Japan."

The Soviets later reported, in a message delivered to the State Department, that search parties had found signs of a possible crash in the area of Moneron Island, west of Sakhalin.

The plane, on a flight from New York to Seoul with a refueling stop in Anchorage, Alaska, apparently wandered far north of its scheduled flight path, which would have passed south of the Kuril Islands and the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the plane "strayed into Soviet airspace over the Kamchatka Peninsula and over the Sea of Okhotsk and over the Sakhalin Island," Shultz said that "at least eight fighters" were scrambled to intercept the airliner, and that the fighter that shot it down "was close enough for a visual inspection of the aircraft."

But Shultz said there was no direct radio contact be-

tween the airliner and the Soviet planes. "We can see no explanation whatever for shooting down an unarmed commercial airliner," Shultz said.

In Santa Barbara, Calif., White House spokesman Larry Speakes announced that President Reagan was returning to Washington today, a day earlier than planned, for a meeting with his national security advisers.

Late yesterday, State Department spokesman John Hughes said Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had sent Shultz a message that was "almost verbatim" the Tass statement. Hughes said the Soviet Embassy was

told that Gromyko's message was "totally inadequate" as an explanation.

Other nations with citizens aboard the downed plane expressed outrage. According to Korean Air Lines, the majority of the passengers were South Koreans, but there were also Japanese, Taiwanese, Filipinos, Thais, Canadians and persons of other nationalities aboard.

In Tokyo, Japanese Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe said that if the airliner had been shot down by Soviet planes, it was "very regrettable." Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Pavlov was summoned to the Foreign Ministry for an explanation.

In Ottawa, Canadian Minister of State Jean-Luc Pepin said that Soviet Embassy Charge d'Affaires Alexander Novikov cautioned him, "Planes go down without being shot down." Last night, Deputy Prime Minister Allan J. MacEachen said he was "very offended" by the Soviet reaction.

In Seoul, South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan met twice with his Cabinet during the day, and later issued a statement accusing the Soviet Union of "a barbarous act" and demanding a Soviet apology. South Korea has no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union—a strong supporter of its rival, North Korea.

STATINTL

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KOPPEL: Good evening. I'm Ted Koppel, and this is Nightline. Press Secretary): (at press conference) Words can scarcely express this horrifying act of violence.

STATINTL

KOPPEL: Tonight, the United States is still waiting for the Soviet Union to explain why it shot down a Korean jetliner with 269 people on board. On tonight, we'll talk to a broad range of specialists on international relations, the Soviet Union, its air defenses, and on international intelligence. We'll discuss what happened, how it happened, and what's likely next.

KOPPEL: If you were watching this broadcast last night, you probably had with the same impression we did: there had been some kind of a collision between fighter jets and a Korean Air Line 747, but senior U.S. officials had led you to believe, that the plane had landed safely on Soviet territory. Sadly, that was not true. The U.S. flag over the White House today, and over all federal installations and all official U.S. buildings around the world, flies at half staff. Two hundred sixty-nine passengers and crewmen aboard Korean Air Line's Flight 007 are missing and believed dead. The aircraft was shot down by a Soviet air-to-air missile. The United States and South Korea have called for a special meeting of the U.N. Security Council tomorrow. Tomorrow, also, President Reagan cuts short his vacation and returns from California to Washington. He'll meet with his top security advisers and with congressional leaders tomorrow and over the weekend. From the president to the Congress to the families of those who were on board the downed jetliner, the reaction today was one of almost sickening shock. Some found it hard to believe that the Soviets had actually shot down an unarmed plane with so many passengers on board. Many who spoke of the incident were deeply moved with pain and with anger.

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KOPPEL: So far, at least, the Soviet government has acknowledged only that an airliner, an unidentified one, penetrated Soviet air space. They have not admitted shooting down the plane. Nor have they come close to expressing anything approaching regret. Joining us now live is the U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, Lawrence Eagleburger. Secretary Eagleburger, what do we know? Are we confident that the Soviet Union shot that plane down? EAGLEBURGER: Well, I think, Ted, the facts are absolutely clear. There is no doubt whatsoever, on the basis of evidence from a number of sources, that the Soviet air force shot down that Korean Airlines airplane. There's no doubt about that whatsoever.

KOPPEL: Give us, if you can, a thumbnail sketch of, of what happened to the best of the U.S. government's understanding and in what kind of a timeframe. EAGLEBURGER: Well, the time frame is, without the facts right in front of me is gonna be a little bit difficult, Ted.

KOPPEL: Roughly. EAGLEBURGER: But in effect, as the secretary said in his statement today, there is no question that the Korean Airlines plane was outside of its normal flight pattern and in fact over-flew Soviet territory. There is also no question about the fact that that plane was captured by Soviet radar for about two and a half hours. There were, at one time or another, eight Soviet aircraft up in the air, either looking for it or in fact later, unfortunately, finding it. There's no question at all about the fact that one Soviet aircraft, the one that in fact finally shot the plane, down came to within two kilometers of the Korean aircraft.

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